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Not out--but up!

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WHEN MARK WARNER rode into the Governor's Mansion in 2001, many Virginians connected with K-12 public education thought they heard the distant strains of a cavalry bugle. The Democrat, saber flashing and steed snorting, would rescue them, they believed, from the state's menacing Standards of Learning that GOP Gov. George Allen had loosed on the status quo in 1995. But it is the SOL that Mr. Warner has saved, in part by making them more palatable.



A repeal or gutting was never really in the cards, inasmuch as pro-SOL Republicans controlled the legislature when Mr. Warner ascended, and General Assembly action is required to materially change the standards established in the Code of Virginia. The state Board of Education can alter SOL objectives, but only after public hearings and only in keeping "with the world's highest educational standards." Not much wiggle room there.

One program Mr. Warner launched to make the medicine go down was Project Graduation, a system of tutoring and remediation aimed at helping students pass the SOL tests standing between them and a sheepskin. The results are now in. Belying saturnine forecasts of massive dropouts by SOL-flustered teens, 94.3 percent of students enrolled in the Class of '04--the first that had to pass the tests to graduate--got diplomas. This is virtually identical to the 94.5 percent graduation average during the five previous years. SOL foe Andy Block of the Charlottesville-based Just Kids group was left to sputter, "It's not like things are any better than they were, and we still have a significant number of kids who don't make it."

Au contraire, sir. Things are concretely better because every kid who did "make it"--the same share as in the recent past--mastered a universal body of tough material. No more rote promotions, low expectations, and fraudulent diplomas. No more high-school grads who can't decode a bus schedule. Moreover, the big knock on the SOL--that they notoriously "teach to the test"--seems overstated. Under the SOL regime, scores on other tests also have risen. For example, the percentage of students scoring "below basic" on the math sections of the National Assessment of Educational Progress for grades four and eight fell between 1992 and 2000 from 41 percent to 27 percent and from 43 percent to 33 percent respectively.

Finally, the number of kids taking advanced-placement classes shot up 50 percent between 1998 and 2002, and the number enrolled in the International Baccalaureate program about tripled. As the governor noted, "By raising the floor, we encouraged students to reach for the ceiling."

Problems with the SOL persist. They may allow too little "play" for the young intellect to wander and explore. Many teachers--some whole schools--"teach to the course": No learning takes place after the completion of SOL units late in the school year. But the good the SOL do contain is better because of Mr. Warner's innovations.

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